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ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses the importance of pretend play in the education of young children in Australia. The booklet notes that pretend, or socio-dramatic, play is characterized by imitative role playing, make-believe objects and situations, persistence, interaction, and verbal communication. Pretend play can appear as early as age 2 and peaks at ages 4 through 6. The booklet discusses the developmental sequence of pretend play, and describes children's pretend play and its benefits. It is argued that it is through complex, self-directed pretend play that young children have the greatest potential to learn, by re-enacting their own life experiences and by sharing and negotiating experiences with other children and adults. Through careful observation, the booklet notes, adults can extend the complexity of pretend play and facilitate children's growth in knowledge, skills, and understanding. (MDM)

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REDISCOVERING PRETEND PLAY

Barbara Creaser

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About the Author: **Barbara Creaser** is currently Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education and Child Care Studies at the Northern Territory University. Her previous positions have included Advisor to preschools with the Kindergarten Union of South Australia and various appointments in South Australia, interstate and overseas preschools. She holds a Masters Degree in Human Development from Pacific Oaks College and her thesis was *An Examination of the Four Year Old Master Dramatist*.

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INTRODUCTION

Three boys are in the 'home' area set up in the middle of a preschool playroom. They are having an animated discussion which frequently attracts the attention of the adult. A teacher is working in the opposite corner reading a story to a group of eight children. The aide is supervising the rest of the children in the playroom. The aide has warned the three boys that they must be quieter. Their conversation is excited but not unnecessarily noisy. I am observing and hoping their play will be allowed to continue. The boys are totally absorbed in their chosen play theme.

George: *Bats cooking.*

Greg: *Throw this in the oven for later.*

Ron: *Just 'tend I have some.*

Pause, the three are busily cooking using pegs, Lego and strings of beads.

Ron: *Just 'tend a warwok (warlock?) comed in. Ha! I was only joking.*

There is more work with Lego, beads and pegs - stirring them in a bowl and shaking them in a saucepan over the stove.

Ron: *And just 'tend I eated all mine, and I put it in the oven for later.*

George: *Just 'tend I had this little cake for dinner.*

Ron: *Now put it on the stove.*

Peremptorily, Ron was banished from the play. He had been warned and he was still too noisy in the adult's view.

Adult: *If you can't work quietly you'll have to leave.*

Ron left the scene looking somewhat bewildered.

These three boys were playing effectively, 'tending' with enthusiasm, sharing knowledge, interacting and negotiating successfully, making numerous transformations in order to play out their chosen theme and they were utterly absorbed in the play. All the positive benefits of the play were far more important than the fact that they were a little excited and noisy. Adults working with young children need to understand, respect and support children's pretend play and take the time to be sure they know what is going on in the episode before they intervene.

> To be human, and to live in a meaningful way, in a culture, requires that we live in and through a very sophisticated abstract and symbolic system that is largely imaginary.
>
> (Fein and Rivkin, 1986:n.p.)

The largely imaginary symbol system of our culture has as its foundation the play of early childhood.

A PLEA FOR PLAY

Smilansky (1968) felt that the ability to play in the socio-dramatic mode was sufficiently important to teach children who were not adept at using it. Bruner (1986), Tizard, Phelps and Plewis (1986), Hutt (1979), Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) and Fein (1987) have all undertaken research on socio-dramatic play and repeatedly the results have shown that children's play is likely to be more complex and elaborate at home and less complex and elaborate in group care settings such as child care centres and preschools.

This plea for 'pretend play' is the result of the dichotomy between early childhood beliefs and practice with regard to the status of socio-dramatic play. Most early childhood personnel will agree that socio-dramatic or pretend play is an effective medium through which young children learn, however there are different types of play and there are different play styles that children adopt to approach life and learning. The educational settings and educational toys that are most often provided are suitable for young children who approached learning as 'explorers', but the children whose predisposition is toward socio-dramatic play (fantasy, pretend, imaginative, or symbolic play) are mostly less well catered for.

The educational settings and educational toys that are most often provided are suitable for young children who approach learning as an 'explorer'.

Smilansky (1968) also suggested that socio-dramatic play is at its peak in children aged four to six years, the years when children are often experiencing their first institutionalized care and education settings.

Some of the reasons for the neglect of provision for socio-dramatic play are provided below.

1) Parents who have the future of their children in mind are concerned if they spend their time "only playing". These parents Elkind (1981) says are intent on hurrying their children. For them, offering their children group experiences before compulsory schooling is like getting them into the "mouse race" so they will cope with the "rat race" later in life. These parents do not understand the value of learning that occurs through play, and the

fact that allowing children to experience a whole year of being a four year old is better preparation for school than giving them school experiences prematurely.

2) The societal view is that the younger the child, the less important is education. In the years before six, children are not compelled to attend school and therefore preschool and child care are seen as unimportant. This view has developed a desire in early childhood teachers to be seen as having the same status as teachers at other levels of education. A consequence of that desire is a shift in their view of their own role - from sharing and facilitating learning experiences with children, to teaching concepts and skills which are often quite inappropriate for the age of the children involved (Kamii,1982).

The adults who work with young children have felt the need to convince society that the job is important and by struggling to be accountable have drifted from supporting play to more structured activities and rigid timetables, both of which reduce the opportunities for highly complex socio-dramatic play.

Throughout the development of early childhood care and education in Australia there have been pleas for play for young children. In the Annual Report of the Kindergarten Union of South Australia 1936-1937 the following poem, attributed to Charlotte Gilman, appeared.

> To the people of place and power
> Who govern and guide the hour;
> To the people who write and teach,
> Ruling our thought and speech;
> and all the captains and Kings
> who command the making of things -
> Give me the good ye know
> that I the child, may grow!
> Light, for the whole day long
> food that is pure and strong,
> Housing and clothing fair,
> clean water and clean air,
> Teaching from day to day
> and room - for a child to play.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child which was unanimously adopted in 1959 acknowledged the right of the child to play.

> **Principle 7:**
>
> The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation, which should be directed to the same purpose as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child also contains the right to play. This document will make adults obliged to provide opportunities for children to engage in all types of play, including exploratory, constructive and socio-dramatic play. Because of the apparent neglect of the latter, this booklet focusses on pretend play.

The different play modes often have areas of overlap. For example, there is often the need for constructive play before socio-dramatic play can proceed.

THE DEFINITIONS OF PLAY

Many writers and researchers have endeavoured to define 'play'. Early efforts were simplistic but as play research has progressed, attempts to define the play of young children are becoming more and more complicated. Most writers use sets of characteristics that describe what play can be. Almy (1984:68) has identified distintive patterns of play which set it apart from other behaviours.

When children play their interest is **self directed**. They are intrinsically motivated to solve problems that stem from either the physical or social world and are important to them.

When children play they are **not** as **concerned with** particular **goals** or ends as they are with the variety of ways a goal may be achieved. In play they experiment with possibilities and become more flexible in thinking and problem solving.

When children play they **free** themselves **from external rules**, from the restrictions imposed by adult regulations, and from the realities imposed by time and space. Paradoxically, however, children generate rules for their play situations and establish roles and plots. Close study of such play reveals that children's negotiations with one another are complex. They make larger utterances and use more varied vocabulary than in other situations.

Children generate rules for their play situations and establish roles and plots. Close study of their play reveals that children's negotations with one another are complex.

When children play with objects they discover what they can do with them. **Increasing** their own **repertoire of behaviours** in this way contrasts with the exploration of objects in which they establish what properties the objects have. Both play and exploration, involving on the one hand the familiar, and on the other the novel, are essential to children's understanding of the world and their own powers.

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Finally, **when children play** they are **actively engaged**. Their attention is not easily distracted. Children who are unable to involve themselves in play, signal that something has gone seriously amiss in their development.

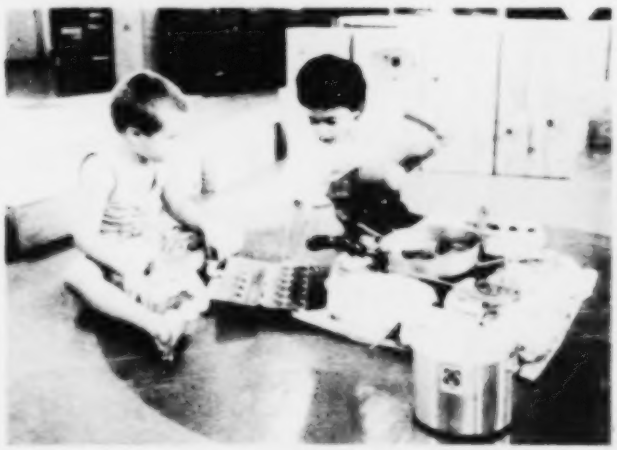
Smilansky (1968) defined socio-dramatic play on the basis of six criteria.

1. **Imitative role play**: the child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization.
2. **Make believe in regard to objects**: movements or verbal descriptions are substituted for real objects.
3. **Make believe in regard to actions and situations**: verbal descriptions are substituted for actions and situations.
4. **Persistence**: the child persists in the play episode for at least ten minutes.
5. **Interaction**: there are at least two players in the framework of the play episode.
6. **Verbal communication**: there is some verbal interaction related to the play episode.

If the play episode incorporated the criteria 1-4 it was considered dramatic play and if all six criteria were present it was socio-dramatic play.

When children play they are actively engaged and are not easily distracted. Children who are unable to involve themselves in play signal that something has gone amiss in their development.

Smilansky (1968) indicated socio-dramatic play peaked in children between four and six years. Many children are capable of moving in and out of many diverse roles. For example, Cheryl, aged four years and ten months, played out nine roles while observed for thirty minutes each week over a four week period. Cheryl was at various times - mother, horse owner, sister, police station cook, shopkeeper, kitchen assistant and reluctant wedding guest. Bianca, observed in the same way, played out many roles and seemed as much at home with planes, police, guns and trains, as with mothers, babies, nurses and fashion wigs. These roles which children take on and act out are known as "person transformations" (Fein, 1987).



Socio-dramatic play peaks in children between four and six years. Many children are capable of moving in and out of diverse roles.

The third and most complex form of pretend behaviour is "ideational transformation" which occurs in some children in the four to six years age range. These children have the capacity to pretend without props of any kind. Children with imaginary friends are one example. Cheryl was also an example of this when she was horse owner.

Cheryl is leading an imaginary horse on a lead round and round the room. She stops near the kitchen sink in the home corner.

Cheryl to Suzie: *You got any scraps?*
Suzie (somewhat taken aback): Y...e...s?
Cheryl: *Can my horse have some?*
Suzie: *Y...e...s!* (apprehensively)

Cheryl leads her horse closer. Suzie with cupped hands holds imaginary scraps out to the imaginary horse. Both girls stand closeby for several seconds.

Cheryl: *Finished?*
Suzie: *Yes?* (questioningly)
Cheryl: *O.K. See ya.*

With this Cheryl walks, holding the lead, to the outside door and out onto the verandah. There is no doubt she is now tying the imaginary lead around a verandah post. Cheryl skips across the yard to the climbing platform.

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THE DEVELOPMENTAL SEQUENCE OF PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play can appear as early as two years of age. Until that time infants and toddlers use familiar objects in a functional and often very repetitive way. At about two years some children become able to use objects 'as if' they were something else.

> Simon is sitting on the carpet of the playroom, feet and legs straight in front. He is rocking a bare black doll in his arms. He now holds the doll in his right arm and with his left hand pulls up his t-shirt. He struggles to pull the t-shirt up to his shoulder. An adult passing sees his effort and leans over and pulls the shirt right up. Simon immediately 'nurses' the doll putting the doll's face to his right "breast" and sits looking at the doll's face while 'feeding' it. Several seconds elapse. Simon switches the doll to his left arm and now is pulling at the left side of his t-shirt. Again the adult offers assistance without speaking. Simon looks up flashing her a smile and moves his doll around so that he is now 'feeding' it on the left side.

Simon used the doll 'as if' it were a baby, the simplest form of object transformation. The doll allowed him to be the agent of the action in this pretend episode, acting out a role he had undoubtedly seen an adult perform.

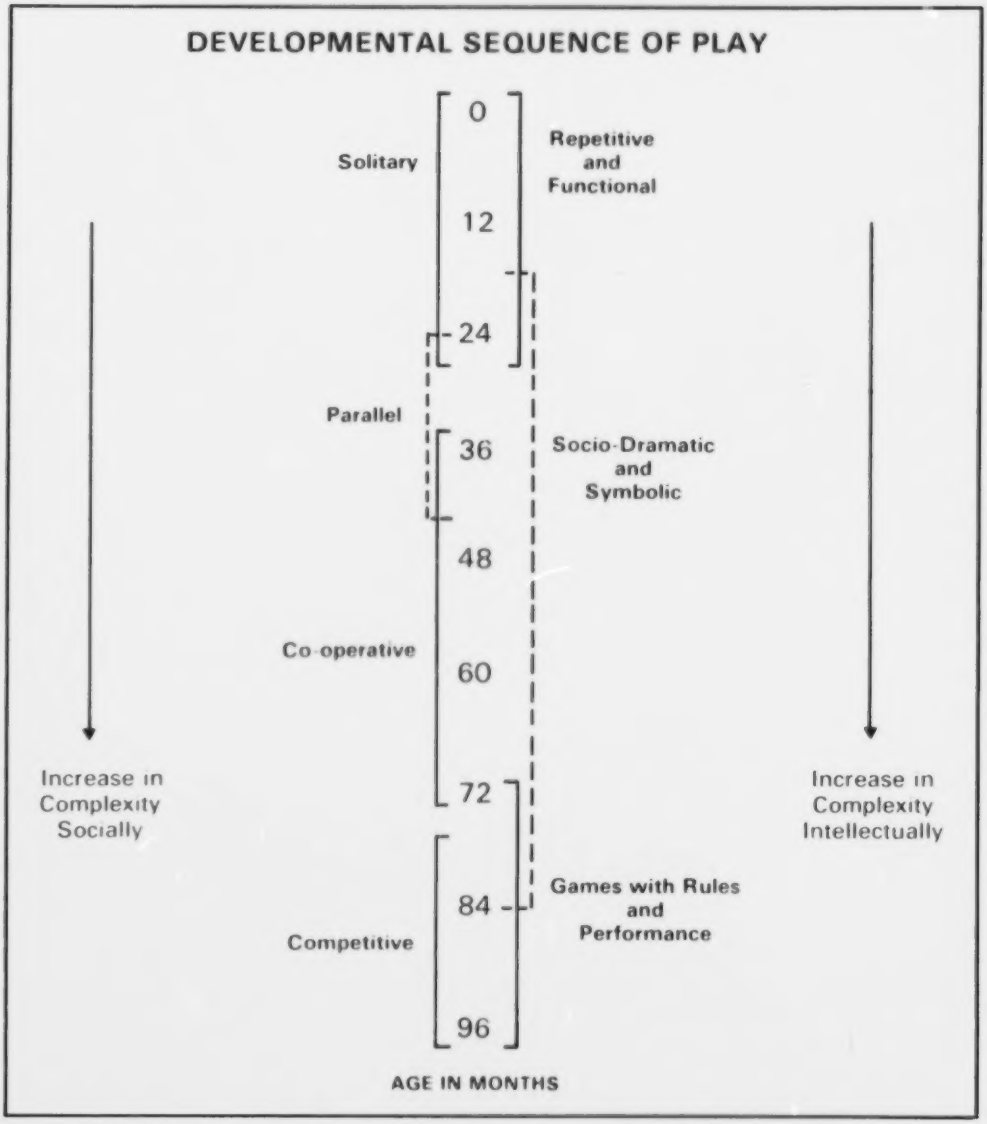
In the second and third years children are capable of playing out several actions in sequence and are able to make the object the agent of the action. A three year old girl was observed playing out an elaborate "lunch-time" procedure on several days.

> Martina is playing on the picnic table and bench under a tree in the outdoor area of a child care centre. She is holding a large red plastic mixing bowl and wooden spade. She leans over from her sitting position on the bench and is filling the bowl with the sandy dirt mixture from the ground around her feet. With the bowl half full she lifts it with some strain and puts it next to her on the table. She puts the spade on the table. She picks up a small yellow plastic bear from the ground with her right hand and stands it in the sand in the bowl. She picks up the spade in her right hand and gets sand from the bowl. She begins to 'feed' the bear.
>
> Martina: *Eat bear, eat!*
> *You bad bear.....*
> *Eat!!*
> *Eat your lunch!*
>
> Suddenly she turns to the observer with a surprised expression and a twinkle in her eyes.
>
> Martina: *Oooo! look he throw up.*

In this example the child made the bear the agent of the action - another development in transformational behaviour.

Although all Suzie's responses were tinged with doubt it was remarkable that these two four year olds were able to interact in this way and both accept the ideational transformations that were necessary for Cheryl's play episode. When such play occurs there are frequently difficulties if some of the children involved cannot operate at that level. There is often the need for children to be cued in, so two levels of language may operate, the script of the play episode and the instructional comments that assist children in understanding what is taking place (Fein, 1987).

The following chart provides an illustration of the development of play, with the increase in social complexity and the increase in intellectual complexity developing concurrently.



Repetitive and Functional Play (practice and sensorimotor play) is engaged in for enhancement of skills and functional pleasure. Garvey(1977:44) refers to this stage as 'Play with objects.....Objects serve as a link between the child and environment in a number of ways. They provide a means by which a child can represent and express his feelings, concerns or preoccupying interests. They also provide a channel for social interaction with adults or other children'.

Children through the functional stage learn to repeat action patterns they previously performed on objects and also to recreate an action on an object they have seen someone else perform - that is the beginnings of imitation.

Symbolic Play or pretend play can begin as early as twelve months though is usually more in evidence at about two years. It reaches the peak between 4-6 years and then gives way to the final play stage.

Games with Rules and Performance: This is a stage where the organisation of the play becomes most important. There is a structure. Children make up rules and encourage players to abide by them or modify the rules to ensure continuity of play. Teams, gangs and clubs abound. Being"in" a group is important to most children. The co-operation of the symbolic stage shifts to competition.

The fact that these stages are illustrated as separate may be misleading and it is important to state that something of each stage continues on into the next and often right on throughout life. For example, learning the use of a computer in later life requires repetition and practice, functional and exploratory play. Montagu (1981) and Erikson(1980) have both advocated that adults should retain the trait of childhood playfulness and that those who do lead more creative lives.

Aside from the functional and intellectual sequential development of play there is also the social dimension which is progressing concurrently.

- **Solitary Play** where an infant plays alone or in a one to one with an adult in a responsive and reciprocal way.
- **Parallel Play** where the children are in proximity but playing individually and quite unaware of the presence of others.
- **Co-operative Play** where children are aware of each other and focus on a single play activity or play theme and work jointly.
- **Competitive Play** where children are involved in structured games that create the winner and loser possibility.

THE BENEFITS OF PRETEND PLAY

> Children of the 80's are growing up in a rapidly changing world characterized by pressure to succeed in all areas. Consequently, they have less time and opportunity to play than did children of previous generations. Decades of research have documented play's crucial role in the healthy development of children from infancy through adolescence. Yet, children's right to play is challenged and must be defended by all adults, especially parents and educators. The time has come to advocate strongly in support of play for all children.
>
> (Isenberg and Quisenberry, 1986:138)

For adults the greatest benefit of play is that children 'do' it so well. All the adults have to do is encourage it, provide resources for it, and watch very carefully. Through their play children will tell us what they know - they know an outstanding amount about their world and how to get along in it. If the adults observe well they will be able to extend the complexity of the play, facilitate children's growth in knowledge, skills and understanding, and share in the human development and social inter-relationships.

It is through complex self-directed socio-dramatic play that young children have the greatest potential to learn, by re-enacting their own life experiences (hence displaying what they know) and by sharing and negotiating experiences with other children and adults (hence adding new knowledge).

Decades of research have documented play's crucial role in the healthy development of children.

There have been, in the past, comments that young children have short concentration spans. This is another area in which socio-dramatic play enhances children's development. When children are playing out their own interests they frequently stay at the activity for much more time than might be expected of children their age. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) talked of the "flow" of activities which are self chosen; how people can lose all sense of time and have an exhilarating feeling of power while totally involved in an activity.

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This would appear to apply to children at play. They can become totally absorbed in the theme and action of the play episode. Tommy (aged 4 years) the leader of the 'White Knights' would continue hectic rushing about leading his gang everyday for as long as the adults allowed. He seemed in another world. At times when the adults demanded return to reality, for example, hand washing for lunch, Tommy's expression was one of disbelief, and he appeared to have something of a struggle to return from the 'White Knight' role to everyday Tommy. On several occasions he refused to leave the play declaring "But I'm White Knight".

Fein (1986) describes the behaviours which were evident in socio-dramatic play including the fact that young children engage in transformation, that is, pretending an object is something it is not. A block might become a cake of soap. They pretend through role play that they are someone else such as 'Wonder Woman' or they can pretend with imaginative ideas that they have a pretend horse or an imaginary friend. It has been shown that imaginative children develop into adults with fulfilling lives and that those same adults maintain the childlike quality of playfulness (Erikson, 1977; Montagu, 1981).

Children are flexible in their imaginative play. The number of roles they can take on is indicative of the life experiences they have accumulated.

Children are flexible in their imaginative play and can build on the ideas of others. They are aware that they are pretending. The variety of themes, the number of roles children can take on, is indicative of the life experiences they have accumulated. In socio-dramatic play they can share their combined knowledge. It is this exchange of knowledge and understandings that contributes to the intellectual growth of children. Along with this is language. For children to interact effectively they need to be able to use the 'script' associated with the role they are assigned. They need to be able to negotiate entry into play - to signal when the organisation and preparation is complete and when the pretend begins. The language of pretend play gains in complexity as the social scene develops and more children become involved. Social competence is challenged through this type of play.

Children together learn to solve problems, negotiate roles and positions, use power over others in leadership roles and at other times are followers. They learn to express their own feelings, and build on their understandings of the feeling of others and respond to other children's emotional reactions.

Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988: 139-140) quote various authors who say that cognitive skills are enhanced through socio-dramatic play. Children acquire:

> improved planning skills (Smilansky (1968) problem solving ability academic skills and attitudes (Sylva, Bruner and Genova, 1976) creativity and divergent thinking (Pepler, 1982; Dansky, 1980) perspective taking (Burns and Brainerd, 1979) memory (Salz, Dixon, and Johnson, 1977) and language development (Levy, Schaefer and Phelps, 1986). Thus the relationship of play to cognitive development is an important one because different levels of play lead to more complex and sophisticated behaviour (Saracho 1986).

The socio-dramatic play episodes frequently occur after considerable preparation, in the course of which, much physical activity occurs. The sort of preparation depends on the theme of the play, but it can include the fine motor activity of writing signs or making intricate decorations to building large block constructions like castles and ships, and running constantly all over the setting to escape the superhero. The physical aspect of socio-dramatic play provides for optimum growth in that area.

Play is central to the lives of all children. It is the natural behaviour through which children learn most effectively.

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CONCLUSION

> Play under the control of the player gives to the child his first and most crucial opportunity to have courage to think, to talk and perhaps even to be himself.
>
> (Bruner, 1986:83)

Play is central to the lives of all children. It is a natural behaviour through which children learn most effectively. Early childhood settings seem to be at risk of moving away from a child centred/whole child approach to a subject based curriculum approach to planning. Much of the talk of early childhood professionals would lead people to think that play predominates in programmes for young children. The practice generally does not bear out the talk. The activities which are provided are often structured, adult controlled, and inappropriate for young children. Observation confirms that often children are watchers not doers. The adults have a plan and must guide the children at every move to achieve the planned outcome.

If children are to have control then adults need to come to terms with letting go. Children can accept well timed adult control through play.

No matter whether the programme is designed to encourage exploring or dramatic play the adults need to allow the children to lead the play.

> Children are born passionately eager to make as much sense as they can of things around them. The process by which children turn experience into knowledge is exactly the same, point for point, as the process by which those whom we call scientists make scientific knowledge. Children observe, they wonder, they speculate, and they ask themselves questions. They think up possible answers, they make theories, they hypothesize, and then they test theories by asking questions or by further closer observations or experiments or reading. Then they modify the theories as needed, or reject them, and the process continues.... If we attempt to control, manipulate, or divert this process, we disturb it. If we continue this long enough, the process stops. The independent scientist in the child disappears.
>
> (Holt, 1989:95)

John Holt (1989) writes about children as scientists. What he says applies also to the children whose learning strategies are predominantly through dramatic or pretend play. If adults continue to interfere, constrain, structure and control, the process will stop. The children will lose their greatest asset and means of learning. Pretend play (socio-dramatic play) is valid. For many children under eight years it is the way they learn best. Pretend play can become the basis for programme planning.

If children are to have control then the adults need to come to terms with letting go of some of that control. Children can accept well timed adult control through play.

Six boys on broomstick horses are galloping around a 'castle' built on a circular mat. The play is getting excitable and noisy.

Teacher: *You boys have had those horses galloping for about ten minutes. They must be getting tired and thirsty, so do you think you could give them a drink and a rest?*

Chorus of boys: *Yes!*

With no further comment the boys gallop to the drink cooler in the corner of the room. Slurping noises come from the corner. Horses are drinking, boys are providing the sound effects and the play is self-controlled. The drink over, several boys resume galloping, several are parking the horses to rest and move to another area of the room to resume different activities that also relate to the 'castle' play.

The teacher's intervention was accepted. It made sense within the play episode. The shared controlling was satisfying to all participants.

Vivian Paley (1987:n.p.) a great exponent of pretend play programming says:

> The secret is recognising that teachers and children share the goal of working together to have as much good play as possible. Then... the experience becomes a year long study in some of the great ideas of the world - friendship, fairness, consideration, concern.

Children need us to act on the goal of working together for as much good play as possible. Pretend play can be anything from bands of marauding superheros to a child with a doll enacting a tender home scene. If adults will allow pretend play to be the basis of the early childhood programme children will make the carrying out of that programme easy and exciting.

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